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AUTHOR Taylor, Anita
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ABSTRACT

This discussion of gender constructs compares them with racial constructs, and examines ways in which language tends to dichotomize or polarize them, and to reject ambiguity as unacceptable. Other curiosities about sexual categorization are noted, including the fact that femaleness is subsumed under the category of "man," which in turn is synonymous with human, but some roles are stereotyped as female only. It is argued that the English language supplies no good alternatives to the biologically-based bipolar construction, and conceptualization follows this pattern. Reliance on certain implicit assumptions: that there are distinct biological sex categories (male and female) and that gender is directly related to sex results in fuzzy conceptualizations of gender. It is noted that some feminist scholarship focuses on diversity among women, not just differences from men. However, little challenge to underlying bipolar assumptions is found in the literature. It is proposed that a useful way of approaching this issue is to pay attention to those people who challenge the biological categories assigned to them or reject the cultural concomitants. Distinctions made between gender assignment (made at birth), gender identity (as expressed both to oneself and to others), gender role, and gender attribution are seen as useful. Further, the need to begin with any gender distinction is disputed. (Contains 63 references.) (MSE)

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by
Anita Taylor, Ph.D.
Department of Communication
George Mason University
Fairfax, VA 22030

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Language and the Construction of Gender: Clarifying Ideas About Gender

Anita Taylor, George Mason University

This paper raises questions about gender and language at a fundamental level. I am asking, What is gender,[1] anyway? What is this "thing" we're discussing? When I pose that question I am really asking to what do we refer when we use the term? I am interested both in how we use language to construct gender and what is the nature of what we construct. Because I believe there is some relationship between the "reality out there" and the language used to refer to it (Lakoff, 1987), I also explore what it is we think is "out there" to which we attach the label, gender. Two incidents crystallize the complexity of these questions.

A woman, a state level judge in a state with judges who work in panels, was identified by one of her colleagues as Puerto Rican. She responded that she was not: Her father was African American, her mother Irish American. The colleague responded, "Oh, so you're Black!" After a pause she said, "Well, yes . . ." and he followed with, "Then how come you speak Spanish?"

Recently, in a grocery store aisle I pushed my cart past a young woman with an infant who could have been no more than 2 weeks old, the child wrapped in a blanket in a baby carrier in her cart. Another woman met us in the aisle. Her face lit up at sight of the infant, and she said, "What a lovely baby! How old is he?" The young woman responded, rather apologetically, "It's a she; I just have her dressed wrong."

Many points about how we think that affect how we think about gender can be drawn from each of these incidents; I will

focus on two. The first point is seemingly simple, and best illustrated by the second case: We have no way of seeing or talking about a baby, or any person, without assigning them to one of two categories, which categories we assume to be dichotomous (separate and opposite) and unchanging. We think of the categories as created by biological realities and we expect them to be demonstrated by social behavior--the rules of which this mother must have felt she violated. I'll return to this idea later to show the process is neither simple nor consistently applied.

The other point, derived from the first case, does not at first appear to relate to the construction of gender at all. But it illustrates what M. J. Hardeman (1992) has described as basic postulates of English, which do relate to gender. Hardeman describes postulates as the themes or concepts that are manifested structurally all across a language. One such postulate in English is number. Hardeman notes that it is nearly impossible "to produce a sentence in English in which there is no singular or plural mark, . . . It is possible, but such sentences can't say much." She adds that "correlatively, we think of the unmarked number, singular, as being primary" (p. 2). In this case, the postulate is illustrated as the races join: One cannot be two races (or two genders). We have no pattern of talking or thinking about a "racial" identity that combines African American and Irish American, to become a new identity combining elements of both previous ones. In the case of mixed racial heritages,

one racial identity is presumed to dominate, in this case the Black one.

The postulate is illustrated in another way with some cases of race and ethnicity. We sometimes want to believe in an entirely new identity, the American, replacing prior heritage. Hence, our nearly uncritical adoption of the melting pot metaphor and idea. But we deny such a possibility to this particular American (and any Americans with African heritage regardless how small) because of how we conceive the Black "race" (Davis, 1991). Or, as Toni Morrison argues, the exclusion may arise from how we define American and white as synonymous (1992). In either case, we clearly construct these racial categories much more narrowly than would be necessary to refer to the "reality" of the combined racial heritages that occur in the U.S., in part at least because of our giving primacy to the number one.

In the case of what we now describe as Black or African American, we refuse to recognize racial blending into some combination, and we refuse to legitimize any such identity by naming it. Our absent language signifies that, where black and white are concerned, white is the unmarked category and any deviation from it puts one out of the white category. We recognize no gradations in between. Moreover, by using these two (and only two) racial categories for black and white we conveniently ignore the vast differences within the two groups. Thus, we create a polarized "reality" of race reified by the language of race.

Clarifying the Gender Construct

Three things make clear the arbitrary nature of these racial constructions: our (U.S) insistence on only two racial categories for black and white; that other cultures' do not use the "one drop rule" of African American classification; and we treat no other racial group in parallel fashion (Davis, 1991).

Here are the parallels of racial language with that about gender. Our language reveals a dichotomous conception of gender much more narrow than the "reality" on which the concept of gender is supposedly based. And, like race, the language of gender conceals the wide variations among people placed within the two categories, with African American women perhaps the paradigmatic example. Using English we find it nearly impossible to talk about how whiteness is inherently involved in how we construe gender (Spellman, 1988). On one level English suggests that the experience of being a woman or a man is unaffected by whether one is white or not, but one needs little reflection to reject that assumption. Sojourner Truth may have presented the point best in her classic, "Ain't I a Woman?" speech urging women's rights in 1851. She argued persuasively, being Black, that her experience of being female differed greatly from that of white women. Bell hooks (1981, 1984), Elizabeth Spellman (1988), and others have shown this pattern persists. They note, among other examples, what the widespread use of the phrase, women and minorities, says about African American women.

That such dichotomous and hierarchical thinking is both pervasive and pernicious in our talk about gender is explored in this paper. While we often recognize the dichotomies of our talk

about gender are inappropriate to fit the "facts" about which we talk, we have not managed to find appropriate ways to discuss that recognition. We have not done so because we have divorced neither the idea of nor the language about gender from the dichotomies of our thinking about sex.

Using English we cannot talk about the sex of a human without using a dichotomy. That is, we see a human's sex as being one of two bipolar (opposite) categories which we assume to exist in fixed and unchangeable amounts. One is either fully female or male, and not just a little bit of either. And one cannot be both. Again, Hardeman's (1992) postulate is at work. We treat anyone with ambiguous or mixed sex manifestations as abnormal, in need of repair. Kessler (1990) notes this phenomenon even among physicians who at one level acknowledge that children born with ambiguous genitals or "abnormal" hormones can develop either gender.

Our use of such categories results in other curiosities. It is no accident that among sexual categories, female is the marked version of a larger category, man, which is taken to be synonymous with human (Penelope, 1990; Spender, 1985). At the conscious level, most English speakers do not recognize that they think in such a way (as when they are jarred by such sentences as 'Man, being a mammal, breastfeeds his young', and habitually choose the feminine pronoun as generic when refering to a sex stereotyped role such as nurse or secretary). But, at another level (and much more often) we clearly do equate male to the unmarked primary position as shown when we exclude the concept of

motherhood from the concept of employment; or when we talk about 'the family of man' or 'the history of mankind.' Indeed, Hardeman (1992) argues that the equation of male with the primary singular is another of the postulates of English.

Those of us in the scholarly community want to believe we are more enlightened. Most scholars say they think of gender, as distinguished from biological sex, is socially constructed and much research has concentrated on examining the nature of gender (e.g., Bem, 1987; Deaux & Major, 1990; Flax, 1987; Kessler & McKenna, 1978, among dozens of others). Yet many scholars, if not most, use the term gender when they have measured whether people identify themselves or are identified by others as male or female, or when the reference is to women or men as a group. And as has become disconcertingly clear (Gentile, 1993; Unger & Crawford, 1993), many use the terms sex and gender synonymously. Scholars regularly use the term gender to refer to "something" closer to an idea of fixed, bipolar categories, than to a less concrete, socially created referent.[2] I use the term something intentionally. Recent scholarly discussions suggest we should recognize gender as relational (Flax, 1997), as a verb (Unger, 1990), as a continuum (Taylor & Beinstein Miller, in press), or as a process of negotiation with the culture (Schwictenberg, 1991). One of the leading sex/gender researchers in psychology (Deaux, 1993) suggests that scholars, at least in the behavioral sciences, should return to the term sex with a hyphen: sex-related or sex-correlated. Thus, she argues, we can continue to examine how people in the one of the two groups (sexes) might

systematically vary from people in the other group (sex). In making this suggestion, Deaux notes the necessity of recognizing that sex is a marker rather than a cause of much behavior identified with either group.

Unfortunately, none of these recent suggestions successfully untangles the thicket in which the ideas and language of sex and gender intertwine. In part we talk and write as we do because our language supplies no good alternatives. More critically, I believe we have no good way to describe gender as other than as two unchanging and bipolar categories because we have not conceptualized it in any other way. At the most fundamental level, we have no clear concept of gender as other than as based on invariable bipolar "realities." Indeed, recent controversies among feminist scholars in a variety of disciplines spring in large part from arguments about the sources of differences between men and women. Gender is the idea, but it gets measured by a biologically based identification.

Most people, even outside scholarly communities, will agree that human behavior and attributes rely on one's sex to only a limited extent. And scholars agree that gender is socially constructed. What is problematic is that we have never conceptualized gender without a biological base in bipolar entities.

We have sometimes characterized the social construction as that of men and women or of feminine and masculine, but in either case the categories were based on acceptance of a pre-existing biological dichotomy. Many scholars have attempted to examine

the nature of this socially created phenomenon. Some scholars in psychology have created measuring instruments (e.g., Bem, 1974 and 1978, who derived a "psychological" sex scale; Spence, 1978, who devised a personal attributes scale related to ideas of masculinity and feminity). In other fields, many followed the lead of such scholars and examined characteristics (e.g., communication behaviors, identity socialization, sex role behaviors, management and administrative behaviors, etc.) using the Bem or Spence tools. Attacks on the measurement schemes themselves led to proposed modifications (Wheeless and Wheeless, 1982), which have themselves been criticized (Wheeless, 1985).[3] Some have completely rejected such measurement tools and turned to different methods of scholarship. Many scholars now see the methods of ethnography and the humanities as more useful in studying gender so that descriptive and critical methods characterize much current scholarship about gender. Much of this literature is rich with recognition that women and men, as groups of women and men, have much in common. And much of it reflects an awareness--at least at some levels--that within the groups of men and women are vast differences among women and among men.

Still, that literature has generated no language to distinguish some women from others, or some men from others--as women and men. I believe that is because the vast majority of scholars interested in gender still rely, at a very basic level, on the following implicit assumptions: (1) there are distinct biological sex categories (male and female); which (2) precede gender and (3) to which gender is tied; which (4) do not change

even though surgery and hormones can alter the physical manifestations, and which (5) are bipolar.

Relying on these axiomatic beliefs about sex results in fuzzy conceptualizations of gender that appear in a number of ways, but most consistently in conversations about the nature and sources of differences between women and men. In recent feminist scholarship for example, disagreements about research into the differences between women and men reflect the sex/gender connections in thinking. In different disciplines these discussions play out in various ways, usually with different vocabularies. Psychologists discuss the issues of essentialism vs. constructionism (e.g., Bohan, 1993; Hare-Mustin & Marecek, 1990) as sources of differences between men and women. Language scholars debate culture vs. power (e.g., Uchida, 1992) in creating female and male differences. In communication and in law (among other areas) the debates have been of about difference vs. dominance (Kramarae, 1981; Rhode, 1989). But in every case, the groups discussed are men and women, with only some recognition that the people within these groups themselves differ. In contrast, in many humanities disciplines postmodernism prevails with the result that some feminist writers express concern that such theory will collapse all categories and result once again in the disappearance of woman from scholars' attention (Perry, 1991).

What I find striking in reviewing these different perspectives is that all revolve around the problems of reacting to perceived differences among two (and only two) categories into

which a person is placed and expected to remain, regardless of how one set of circumstances may vary from another. Feminist theory is illustrative. One set of research shows how the differences "between" (a not insignificant word) women and men, at least the nonphysical ones, are not very large (Canary & Hause, 1993; Hall, 1984; Halpern, 1986; Hyde, 1990). Or conversely, when finding substantial differences, scholars attribute them to social structures (Epstein, 1988; Kanter, 1977; Lott, 1990). In contrast, radical feminists, some lesbian feminists, and more recently a variety of neoFreudians have echoed many U.S. 19th century suffragists by seizing the concept of difference and arguing that women display many more positive qualities than men and that a feminized (or refeminized) culture is needed (e.g., Daly, 1978; Ferguson, 1989; Miller, 1976;).[4] Other writers, such as bell hooks (1981, 1984, 1990), Gloria Joseph and Jill Lewis (1981) many other African American feminists have correctly challenged the dominant white feminists with ignoring how race and class divide women, an argument Spellman (1988) developed with great precision using a philosopher's tools. So, now (rightly) we have learned to celebrate feminism**s**, and to value diversity among women, not just differences from men.

And yet, within all this scholarship, few have challenged the underlying assumptions: That in spite of differences among women and men due to race, class or other elements, the words women and men refer to two supposedly distinct categories of entities. Deborah Rhode, who edited a fine volume in which

writers struggled with how to conceptualize and use difference exemplifies the point when she said, "Of course, whatever else we say about difference between the sexes, we cannot deny its existence." (Rhode, 1990, p. 4). In other work, Rhode cogently argued that focus should be shifted from what are the differences among women and men and how large they are to "the difference difference makes," or what she calls "gender disadvantage" (1989, p. 3). However, in this thorough and persuasive argument for law and legal scholars to recognize the blurred boundaries of a series of false dichotomies created by law and culturally assigned roles, Rhode does not challenge the underlying assumption of two unchanging genders.

In sum, careful consideration of our scholarship shows that while we want to construe gender as socially constructed, we have not divorced our thinking about gender from the deeply buried categorical assumptions about sex. Even less successfully have we created new language categories to reflect or legitimate new ways of thinking.

One useful way to examine our problems of thinking and naming is to attend to people who challenge the biological categories assigned to them, or who reject the cultural concomitants of being male or female; and to consider them without thinking of them as freaks or deviants who reflect failed socialization or flawed gender identity acquisition (Kessler & McKenna, 1978; Devor, 1989). Even academics who reject judgmental assessments of these "gender outlaws" (Chapkis, 1993) tend to omit them from our research because they are thought to

be so rare. If we instead recognize that the very existence of these "gender blenders" (Devor, 1989) and "gender benders" (Bornstein, 1992), no matter how few, challenges the fundamental assumptions upon which our theories are built, we will make more progress toward creating new ideas and new language about gender.

Kessler and McKenna (1978), like Fausto-Sterling (1985), demonstrate unequivocally that the supposedly clear biological dichotomy between male and female humans is neither clear nor dichotomous. Unless one defines as male any individual with a Y chromosome and as female anyone without a Y chromosome, the categories are not mutually exclusive. That is true whether the criterion is hormones, or any of variety of sex markers or secondary sex characteristics. All are shared by people of each supposedly distinct sexual category and to a large degree vary more among the members of each sex category than do the average of the two categories vary from each other. Kessler and McKenna also showed that many people with the "wrong" chromosomes develop female gender identities while some people with no Y chromosomes develop male gender identities. Cross cultural studies describe cultures that permit gender identities that contradict external sex organs or where people were attributed special status due to possessing biological manifestations of both male and female. But no such flexibility exists in the English language or in the thinking of most people who use English.

In moving toward more useful language, distinctions made by Kessler and McKenna (1978) will be useful. They distinguish among gender assignment (what infants are labelled at birth),

gender identity (what one calls oneself), gender role, and gender attribution (what gender other people decide a person is). For thinking about new gender categories, I add that gender identify has at least two facets, each of which probably varies by situation: how one identifies oneself to oneself, and how one identifies oneself to others. We need language that responds to both data and theorists' arguments that sex-correlated behavior varies according to the situation as shown by numerous studies supporting for Giles' accommodation theory. Both men and women accommodate to each other, communicating more similarly in mixed sex groups than in single sex groups (Keashley, in press; Kramarae, 1981; Mulac, 1988; Watson, in press).

For us to move forward in gender research in any discipline, we must divorce the idea of gender from the dichotomous categorization between women and men. To do that we need at least two elements: a change in thinking and a change in language. We will need to be consistent in foregrounding our concepts of gender as plural, as mental constructs created as we interact with self and others, and our culture. Hence, we need always to be clear that genders exist in relation.[5] I purposefully do not say in relationships. When one says genders exist in relation, the English speaker thinks, in relation to what (or whom)? Which is precisely the point. But we must be sure also to say, when? Under what circumstances? We need to embue our mental constructs of gender as relation with the quality of continuous variables to avoid polarizing. We must not think of a scale with female or feminine on one end and male or

masculine on the other. We need to be able to ask, To what extent do we "do" genders, when we do them?[6] To what extent does the constructing of gender (or genders) for me take place in the mind and behavior of those I interact with? The gender blending women interviewed by Devor (1989) often found themselves ejected from women's restrooms. Such gendered behavior is more complex than a reaction to how one dresses. When we have constructs reflecting such complexity, we will be clear that genders aren't something we "discover" either from biology or culture. They are ideas of something that people co-create as they interact with each other in specific situations, calling, of course, on their resources of biology, of course, as well as of language, ideology, culture and previous personal experience.

Clearly, neither lay nor scholarly language yet provides much assistance to us in thus "verbing" gender. Indeed, the mind boggles at the effort required to create appropriate words for the task. And yet, once we manage to divorce sex and gender, options are not out of reach. Even lay speakers recognize that masculine and feminine refer to behaviors as well as attributes, not to biology. They also recognize the concepts as variable. When asked to describe the most feminine and masculine person they know and to say when that person was most or least feminine, many students responded with words describing behavior as well as biology and with words denoting variable amounts (Beinstein Miller & Taylor, 1993).

Kessler and McKenna (1978) and Lott (1990) raise a legitimate question. If we want our scholarship to be accurate,

why do we start with an assumption of two sexes or genders and then investigate differences in ANYTHING? Why not look at other characteristics or behaviors, categorize the practices or characteristics, then seek to see what variability might be within the new categories? We have found, in the vast majority of (almost all) research comparing women and men, that within sex variation is greater than between sex variation. See for example the summaries in Cynthia Fuchs Epstein (1988), Fausto-Sterling (1985), Judith Hall (1984), and Janet Hyde (1990). Many others are available.

As an example, suppose we started with the categories of polite or not polite speech. Then, after distinguishing those two categories, we could inquire to see if any of a variety of qualities characterize polite people, such as age, social group, economic status, amount of education, particular settings, relationships to recipient of politeness, expectations of recipient, etc. We could ask about sex as well. We have good reason to hypothesize that polite people would vary on these other characteristics as much more more than by whether they are men or women.

This kind of change is not so large as to be unthinkable. Why then have we, in our study of genders, so rarely analyzed them in such a way? One (certainly not the only) reason we don't do that is that we conceptualize genders as fixed, discrete categories. In contrast we recognize politeness as behavior that varies, and that the situation influences how politely a person behaves. Since we don't see genders (or sex) as continuous

variables, nor as influenced by situation, we do not think of doing such research.

We should. Clearly, once the idea of gender is separated from sex, gender is behavior, and it is behavior in relation. Gender attributions are made by each person with whom we interact, usually in the absence of seeing or knowing the assumed biological basis for that attribution. In ways most of us never focus on (including use of language), each of us is always "doing" gender. Yet as scholars we know very little about what "doing" gender consists of because we have, led by our unstated assumptions about the link between gender and sex, concentrated on studying gender as an attribute, fixed once identified, which varies (discretely) from male to female.

How much more productive would be our research about language and communication if we never again wrote or talked as if sex or gender were things, characteristics or attributes! How productive if we quit asking what men and women do or say and instead began to ask what do people do or say that leads us to decide they are male or female, or to decide they are feminine or masculine. Then, having hypothesized and tested some answers to that question, we could ask under what circumstances are those decisions made? And how do the decisions vary as the circumstances vary? Foremost also among the questions about circumstances would be how the people involved relate to each other, what power asymmetries may exist among them. This is, of course, only a partial list of rich research possibilities.

Clarifying the Gender Construct

How much do we gain, compared to the dangers, when we continue to accept and even perpetrate the perception of genders as dichotomous?[7] Even our poorly conceptualized research about gender has demonstrated differences between men and women are always smaller (often much smaller) when actual behavior is examined than when such differences are examined via self-reports of behavior or when people report their expectations for behavior of others (Epstein, 1988; James, 1991; Keashley, in press; Ruble & Schneer, in press; Smythe, 1989; Watson, in press). Yet, widespread, in the scholarly and "lay" populations alike, are beliefs about differences in women and men's behavior. Moreover recent essentialist constructions of difference have spurred both lay and scholarly beliefs about biological bases for those differences. Even Tannen's (1990) work, while developing an argument about differences between men and women as cultural, relies on the fixed gender polarities. Moreover, in relying heavily on research about children's behavior, this work reinforces beliefs in biological causes for the different cultures. Alison Jagger (1990) persuades me that even when we try to reclaim female differences as positive ones, we risk reinforcing a world view historically hostile to women.

In 1989 Cheris Kramarae made a point I have heard from many other places. She noted that one seldom hears the word androgyny any longer. And while I make no brief for the term or for the various ways in which measurement has been attempted, I do believe we need to develop a construction of gender that rejects fixed, discrete, bipolar categories. Women of color have pushed

current feminist thinking a long way toward that goal. We now largely recognize that no unifying "essence" that unites all women and that we must accommodate differences among women if our thinking and research are to be accurate and useful. But so far we have ignored the really radical implications of such thinking. Perhaps women and men are not the most useful ideas. They implicitly perpetuate the concept of man to which woman is the alternative and of these two ideas as invariable bipolar entities.

We probably need new language, since conceiving of an idea is difficult without the words with which to describe it and since the concept of gender may be by now inextricably linked with invariability and dichotomy. Perhaps we need to discuss sex-correlated behavior as Deaux (1993) suggests. But, equally important is to do as Unger and Crawford (1993) argue, clarify our thinking. In that process, the questions I have suggested should be helpful. With new processes to name, we will develop new language. But whether we coin new phrases or reappropriate old ones, we need to progress much farther in conceptualizing.[8]

I do not claim to have enumerated all the ideas the concept of gender must involve, but some of them are clear. The concept must reflect multifaceted nature of identity, and its constantly in process quality. It must also reflect how we "do" gender through behavior and in relation. It must discard the idea of gender as discrete category. The concept cannot be built on an assumption of biology as the base of two, and only two, invariable genders. It needs to recognize aspects of situation

(including power and ideology--among other things), as modifying both the nature of and salience of the variable. In 1988 Barbara Bate identified a delight in creativity as one component common to the communication of a wide variety of women. What seems to be needed now is for us to call on that creativity, not just in deconstructing the current concept of gender, but in constructing useful alternative ideas.

Endnotes

[1] It should be obvious here that I do not refer to gender in the sense of linguistic marking. I am discussing gender as a concept of sex-correlated or sex-marking behavior (including talk), attitudes, attributes, etc.

[2] I encourage readers to review the useful exchange about the language behavioral scientists interested in sex and gender should employ included in the technical commentary section of Psychological Science, March 1993, pp. 120-126.

[3] Documents describing the measurement controversy include (Bem, 1979; Wheeless, 1985; Spence, 1979 and 1984).

[4] The work of Gilligan (1982) and Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarrule (1986) has provided much recent impetus to this "women are better" debate, although I do not, myself, read their work as either essentialist or polemical. As a result, I don't classify them among the "women's ways should be valorized over men's" theorists even though many others do and they may perhaps put themselves there.

[5] Though certainly not the only one to do so, Jane Flax (1987) issued a call for recognizing a category described as gender relations. And while this idea is quite similar to what I am proposing, I intentionally avoid pluralizing the term to avoid creating a noun that does not automatically prompt the following question, to what or to whom?

[6] Kessler and McKenna (1978) suggested that we "do" gender; Unger (1990) suggested gender should be thought of as a verb.

[7] See Deaux and Major, 1990 for an argument regarding the danger of the dichotomy.

[8] I should also make clear that mine is not the only, nor the first, call for reconceptualization. The Kessler and McKenna work could be read in such a way, and many others have made similar arguments, including Sandra Bem herself (1987). See, for example, Flax (1987), Morawski (1987) and Unger and Crawford (1993). But insofar few such results are yet visible, the argument is still fresh.

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